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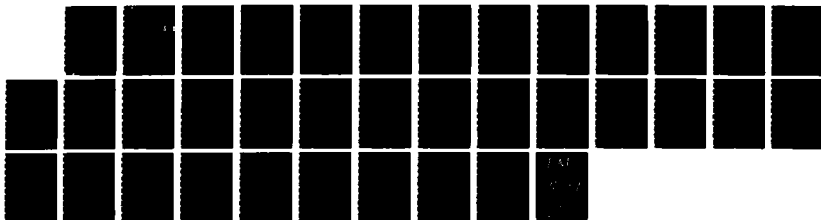
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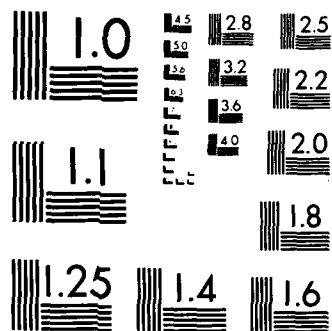
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Vietnam and Laos: The Special Relationship

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## Vietnam and Laos: The Special Relationship

### Introduction

During the past forty years, the communist leaders of Vietnam and Laos have developed intimate ties. They served together in the revolutionary struggle against the French colonial regime. With the defeat and departure of the French, their joint struggle turned to ridding their countries of the U.S. presence and the regimes which it supported. During this joint effort, they developed what both officially refer to as a "special relationship."

As the more powerful member of this relationship, Vietnam has made a significant imprint upon the Lao Communist movement. The Vietnamese communists have helped to recruit the Lao leadership, shape its ideology, develop its military forces, and organize its government. It is not by chance that the Vietnamese find the current regime in Laos to be a politically reliable junior partner.

It is a premise of this paper that the Vietnamese leaders are pleased with their relationship with Laos and they have this Lao model in mind as they attempt to shape the politics of Cambodia--although they must make important adjustments for the Cambodian context. They realize that the cultural and historical context within Cambodia is much different from that of Laos, that the Cambodian national animosity toward Vietnam is far deeper and much less easily managed. The Vietnamese did not have the same long-standing, intimate interaction with the Cambodian revolutionary leadership as they had in Laos. Cambodian opposition to Vietnamese intervention is much more difficult to deal with and even more important, the international opposition to their domination is far more costly. Nevertheless, in order to



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This view that its security concerns are intertwined with those of Laos and Cambodia has roots in Vietnam's nationalist revolution. General Vo Nguyen Giap, in 1950, observed that :

Indochina is a strategic unit: a single theatre of operations. Therefore we have the task of helping to liberate all of Indochina--especially for reasons of strategic geography, we cannot conceive of Vietnam completely independent, while Cambodia and Laos are ruled by imperialism. <sup>1</sup>

Following the Vietnamese communist seizure of power in Saigon, in April 1975, the Lao communist leadership moved confidently to consolidate its own power. Thus, Vietnam had a reliable junior partner in Vientiane when the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) was proclaimed in December 1975. By contrast, Vietnam's obsession about the threat to its security was reinforced by the hostility of the Pol Pot regime, which had marched into Phnom Penh in April 1975. Vietnam's leaders concluded that the provocations against Vietnamese territory were a product of manipulation by its erstwhile ally but historic enemy to the north, China.

The threat from China weighs heavily upon Vietnam's mind. The Vietnamese now see the goodwill from China during the First and Second Indochina War, when they received logistic support for their revolutionary effort, as but a temporary respite in their historic struggle with the Chinese. Special circumstances during those wars had produced shared interests between these two revolutionary movements. But even as they shared common objectives during the period from 1945 to 1975, there were strains in the relationship, as both sides now assert. The strains ruptured into open conflict after the communist victories in Indochina.

The Vietnamese felt compelled to invade Cambodia in December 1978 because they perceived the hidden hand of China beneath the Pol Pot

understand Vietnam's present policy toward both its Indochina neighbors, it is crucial that we understand the Lao model.

The aim of this paper is to examine that Lao model--the "special relationship." The paper will cover the following topics:

- The historic roots of that relationship
- How current leaders in Vietnam and Laos perceive that relationship
- International perceptions
- Management of the relationship
  - Legal basis
  - Party-to-party
  - Military-to-military
  - Government-to-government
- Assessment

Prior to pursuing these questions, it is necessary to place the Vietnam-Lao relationship within the context of an Indochina bloc with Vietnam as the dominant power.

#### Vietnam's Security Concerns in Indochina

The primary concern driving Vietnamese policy toward its Indochinese neighbors is security. Vietnam, somewhat like Israel, is obsessed by its security. It sees itself as surrounded by enemies and believes that it can rely only upon itself for its defense.

Vietnam's chief interest in Laos and Cambodia, therefore, is that these countries not provide a base for hostile action against Vietnam. Much like Vietnam's major ally, the Soviet Union, in its attitude toward its Eastern European neighbors, the Vietnamese believe that their security interests will be protected only if there are compliant regimes, sensitive to Vietnam's interest, in Vientiane and Phnom Penh.

11. they applied more effort to the recruitment of ethnic Lao members. Nevertheless, it was not until 1955, four years after the ICP had given instructions for the formation of separate parties in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, that 25 Lao members of the ICP were able to form the Lao People's Party (later renamed the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the LPRP).

When the LPRP held its 4th Congress in November 1986, eight of those original 25 ICP members who founded the party still filled the top positions of the 13-member ruling Politburo, attesting to the remarkable continuity and cohesion of the leadership. In rank order, they are:

1. Kaysone Phomvihane
2. Nouhak Phoumsavan
3. Souphanouvong
4. Phoumi Vongvichit
5. Khamtai Siphandon
6. Phoun Sipaseut
7. Sisomphon Lovansai
8. Sisavat Keobounphan

Only Maisouk Saisompheng, a probable ninth former ICP member, did not sit upon the Politburo, although he remained a full member of the 60-member Central Committee.

These Lao leaders have had a long and close relationship with their Vietnamese mentors. Most, perhaps all, speak Vietnamese. Some have family ties with Vietnamese. Kaysone's father was a Vietnamese who had served as secretary to the French Resident in Savannakhet. Nouhak and Souphanouvong have Vietnamese wives. Their world view was shaped by their common struggle with the Vietnamese. Their links have been so strong that today they may not differentiate the Lao interest from that of the Vietnamese.

provocations, well aware that they ran the risk of Chinese retaliation. The risk turned to reality when the Chinese riposted with a punitive strike against Vietnam in February 1979, announcing they must "teach Vietnam a lesson." Vietnam's current attitude toward the historic threat from China was aptly described to an American scholar by a Vietnamese official:

In all history, we have been secure from China in only two conditions. One is when China is weak and internally divided. The other is when she has been threatened by barbarians from the north. In the present era, the Russians are our barbarians. <sup>2</sup>

Given even higher priority than its relationship with the Soviet Union is Vietnam's commitment to Indochinese solidarity. Vietnam is convinced that the three Indochina countries are interdependent for security, which can be achieved only by establishment of regimes in Laos and Cambodia on whom Vietnam can rely. In fact, "to safeguard and strengthen the militant alliance and solidarity among the three Indochinese nations" has been elevated by Vietnam to a "law of development." Although the Central Committee acknowledged economic failures at the 6th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) meeting in Hanoi in November 1976, there was no wavering on this commitment to solidarity.

### Historic Roots of the Special Relationship

The Vietnamese asserted that the liberation of Laos and Cambodia from French colonial rule was, as General Giap expressed it, essential to their own struggle for independence, but their pursuit of this goal was by means of a Vietnamese-dominated Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), working in each country. During the first decade and a half of the ICP's existence, the Vietnamese leaders of the ICP relied almost exclusively upon Vietnamese residents of Laos to make up the Lao section of the Party. After World War



during the 1960s and early 1970s, the Vietnamese communists simultaneously worked with the Pathet Lao to expand PL political and military control of Laos and to develop their organizational competence. By the time the Paris Agreement of 1973 was signed, the Lao communists were in a position to claim, successfully, equality of power with the Royal Lao Government. They established a new bipartite coalition government negotiated after the Vientiane Agreement which produced the cease-fire of February 1973.

Shortly after the Vietnamese communists marched into Saigon to complete their quest for power, the Lao communists were emboldened to press for full power in Vientiane. They engineered provocative political demonstrations against their Vientiane-side coalition partners, who were already paralyzed by the communist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia, and by the American departure.

Most of the Vientiane-side ministers and top-level military officers fled across the Mekong to Thailand, and the LPRP consolidated its power without bloodshed. Non-communist diplomatic missions, although they pared their staffs, remained in Vientiane. On December 2, 1975, the LPRP deposed the King and announced the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR).

As noted earlier, the Lao communists' accession to power could not be described as the culmination of an indigenous peasant revolution founded on widespread popular support. If one were to search for a relevant comparative case, it might be Czechoslovakia in 1948, in which a parliamentary maneuver by a disciplined communist organization, which had a certain amount of popular appeal, if not a parliamentary majority,

During the two decades from the formation of the Lao party until it took power in Laos, the Vietnamese communists helped to develop the semi-secret LPRP, its political front organization, the Lao Patriotic Front, and the mass organizations that it coordinates. The Vietnamese helped to recruit and train the Lao People's Liberation Army (LPLA), providing it advisors and logistic support, as well as reinforcement by direct Vietnamese troop commitments. The Vietnamese helped to shape the Lao ideology, and gave training in the formation of a government and administration.

Thus, the Pathet Lao (or PL, as the Lao revolutionary movement was formerly labelled) was nurtured, from its origins, by the Vietnamese. It did not grow out of a mass movement based on peasant discontent and land hunger, as in China and Vietnam. Rather, it took shape as a result of military support and political guidance provided by a more powerful neighboring revolutionary organization. It is not surprising that the Lao revolutionary organization, and the subsequent government that it established, was modeled on the Vietnamese communist system.

During its intervention in Laos from 1955 to 1975, Hanoi was pursuing three fundamental objectives: protecting its own borders; gaining access to South Vietnam; and promoting the establishment of a politically congenial regime in Laos. During that wartime period, the North Vietnamese were concerned that their enemies not attempt to manipulate against them the highland minorities of Laos, all of whom were more numerous in adjacent Vietnam.

After 1959, as the war heated up in South Vietnam, Hanoi gave high priority to developing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the southern panhandle of Laos, the main avenue for the dispatch of personnel and supplies from North to South Vietnam. As they pressed their war effort within South Vietnam

Marxist-Leninists, cultural Confucianists, and professional revolutionaries--all traits which give them a penchant for shaping Lao society.

Notwithstanding the shambles they have made of their own economy, they are inclined to guide the economic policies of their smaller neighbor. On the other hand, the Vietnamese recognize that when they promote measures in the more gentle, complaisant, Theravada Buddhist Lao culture, there will be significant differences in outcome. Vietnamese mentors understand that Lao institutions and policies, therefore, will be but a pale reflection of those in Vietnam.

### The Lao Perspective

The top-level Lao leaders have worked so long and intimately with the Vietnamese revolutionaries, albeit as apprentices, that they approach problems within the same framework as their mentors. The LPRP leaders have reason to be grateful toward the Vietnamese for their critical role in bringing them to power. Moreover, the Vietnamese have brought not only support on their behalf, but have helped them to develop central control and cohesion, vital ingredients for a movement attempting to govern a society with important regional, ethnic, tribal, and linguistic cleavages. During their long association, the Lao leaders appear to have become psychologically dependent upon their more powerful and persistent senior partners.

Thus, the Lao see their special relationship with Vietnam as a natural, and probably desirable, outgrowth of their revolutionary history. Moreover, even if the thought of challenging Vietnamese dominance secretly crossed the mind of an LPRP leader, he would quickly conclude there would be little chance for success. It would be more comfortable not to think such thoughts.

seized power almost without violence, aided by the threat of outside (Soviet, in the Czech case) armed intervention. 3

#### The Vietnamese Perspective on the Special Relationship, 1975-1987

In pursuing its special relationship with Laos, Vietnam aims to ensure that the LPDR's policies, primarily in foreign affairs and defense, are consonant with Vietnam's interests. Lao foreign policy need not be identical with that of Vietnam, as long as it follows its general line. In fact, a measure of latitude for the LPDR can sometimes be used for the pursuit of Vietnam's objectives. For example, the LPDR retained friendly relations with Pol Pot's Cambodia, even after the severe tensions between Vietnam and Phnom Penh had been made public. In this case, President Souphanouvong led a delegation to Phnom Penh, apparently on behalf of Vietnam, as an intermediary in search of a solution to the dispute. As another example, the LPDR has continued diplomatic relations with the United States, even though U.S.-Vietnamese relations were ruptured with the communist seizure of Saigon in 1975. At times, certain LPDR initiatives toward the U.S. appear to be probes or overtures of the SRV.

Whenever Vietnam embarks on a fundamental policy change, the LPDR must follow. When Vietnam launched its invasion against the Pol Pot regime, the LPDR made common cause with its senior partner. Lao leaders maintained a respectful posture towards China until the Chinese incursion into Vietnam, in March 1979. At that point, the LPDR denounced China and called for the withdrawal of the Chinese aid mission, engaged largely in road-building projects in Laos.

As for guidance of Lao domestic policies, the Vietnamese communist leaders appear more ambivalent. On the one hand, they are ideological

Even China, which frequently denounces Vietnam for its intrusion into the internal affairs of Laos, recognizes the LPDR as the legitimate government. The Chinese Chargé d'Affaires in Laos explained to me, during an interview in Vientiane in December 1985, the difference in the Chinese attitude toward Laos and Cambodia. "Kampuchea was occupied by Vietnam. Foreign troops overthrew the legitimate government. Kampuchean troops are now resisting foreign occupation," he said. Thus China was supporting a "just struggle." By contrast, he noted that the LPDR is the legitimate government and "the PRC has always respected it."

The Chargé expressed official indignation when he heard that a Lao government official had said to me that China was engaged in subversion in Laos. The Chargé noted that 2,000 refugees from Laos had been resettled in Yunan Province, close to the Lao border and "if relations between our two countries improve," he said, "these refugees could return to Laos, if they wish." But he insisted that China had never supported guerrillas operating against the LPDR.

Independent observers have given reliable accounts of a camp in China's Yunan Province where Lao resistance elements had taken refuge and were receiving some desultory assistance from the Chinese. Chinese support to these, or other dissidents, does not appear to be very substantial. Nevertheless, the Chinese are not averse to creating anxiety in the LPDR, and more importantly for the its Vietnamese allies, making it clear that they have the potential to cause trouble.

Thailand and its ASEAN partners have also accepted the transfer of power in Vientiane to the Lao communists as an unpleasant fact of life. The Thais were disturbed by the deposition of the Lao monarchy. They were also uncomfortable at the removal of the long-standing buffer between them

A Lao rationale for the LPDR relationship was put to me by the Lao Deputy Foreign Minister, Souban, in an interview in Vientiane in December 1985. He noted that history has thrust the three Indochinese nations into a single bloc:

Historically, we have commitments to aid our friends in Kampuchea and Vietnam and they have historic commitments to aid us. We consider a threat against Vietnam or Kampuchea a threat to us. We must take part--rightly or wrongly ("à tort ou à raison"). This is dictated by historic engagement.

Responding to the frequent observations by Westerners that Laos has become a dependency of Vietnam, the Deputy Foreign Minister added:

Westerners can't understand many things that happen in this part of the world, just as we Asians can't understand much about the Occident. You must understand our line of reasoning. Our method of liberation in 1975 was different from that of Vietnam's or Kampuchea's. Our manner of socialism is different from theirs. We are interdependent. There is interdependence everywhere. Economically, the U.S. is also interdependent. We need the help of our brother countries.

The concept of interdependence offers the Lao ruling elite an explanation that helps them to maintain their self-respect. There is a great sensitivity in Lao ruling circles to the charge that the LPDR is a "puppet" of Vietnam. However, this rhetoric of interdependence does not hide the reality, even to themselves, that Vietnam is the dominant partner in the special relationship.

### International Perceptions

Unlike its fraternal Kampuchean partner in the Indochina bloc, the LPDR has generally been accepted in the international system. Despite the criticism of Vietnamese domination that is expressed in the non-communist world, there has been little challenge to its legality.

The United States continued its diplomatic relations with Laos after the transfer of power to the communists in 1975. The U.S. mission has been reduced to nine foreign service officers, the maximum permitted by the LPDR, symbolic of the decline in American influence from the pre-1975 years when the number of its official representatives reached 2,000. The U.S. has been critical of the Vietnamese military presence in Laos but, unlike its posture toward the regime in Phnom Penh, it accepts the legality of the LPDR.

In summary, in contrast with the situation in Cambodia, there is neither a credible threat to the LPDR from within Laos, nor is there significant opposition to it in the international arena. This international acceptance of the Lao regime means that its relationship with Vietnam is not challenged. In view of the high costs in international sanctions that Vietnam pays for its role in Cambodia, the Vietnamese must find especially attractive this feature of the Lao model.

### Managing the Special Relationship

#### The Legal Basis: The 25-Year Friendship Treaty

The legal basis for the special relationship between Laos and Vietnam was formalized with the signing, July 18, 1977, of a 25-year friendship treaty.<sup>4</sup> The treaty consists of six brief articles which describe mutual obligations in broad language, and include three protocols dealing with defense, border delineation, and Vietnamese economic assistance which remain secret to this day. Article 1 captures the spirit of the agreement in the following terms:

The two parties undertake to deploy all their efforts to safeguard and develop the relationship between Laos and Vietnam, to reinforce their solidarity and mutual confidence, their long-term cooperation and mutual aid in all domains in the spirit of proletarian interna-

and their historic rival, Vietnam, although they do not feel as great a sense of threat from Laos in the north as from Cambodia in the east. Despite their displeasure with developments there, Thailand and the ASEAN nations accept the current political arrangement in Laos--unlike that of Cambodia--as a fait accompli, and they all maintain diplomatic relations with the LPDR.

Thailand does provide sanctuary for anti-LPDR resisters, who also draw limited amounts of support from the Thai military. Most of the Thai assistance comes from local military commanders who want intelligence from Laos, and who judge it useful to harass the Lao communists and their Vietnamese mentors. Both lowland Lao and Hmong dissident bands, operating separately, find recruits among the restless young men in the refugee camps in Thailand.

The Royal Thai Government (RTG), like the PRC, officially denies that it supports insurgency in Laos. In fact, Thai officials resumed negotiations with Lao authorities in 1986 aimed at reducing tensions between the two countries, and both promised renewed efforts to make the Mekong a "river of peace," as the prime ministers of both countries had agreed to do in 1979. But Thai military authorities still seem inclined to offer low-level assistance to selected resistance elements.

Even with this limited Thai and Chinese encouragement, the resistance constitutes a minimal threat to the government. It imposes costs, raises tensions, and sustains suspicion among the Lao leadership of the malevolent intentions of its external enemies, but it does not threaten the continuity or stability of the regime. In the unlikely event that the insurgents were to increase their strength significantly, the result would likely be a larger Vietnamese military presence in Laos, the opposite of what the Lao insurgents would want to accomplish.



that the 1977 Treaty of Friendship gives Laos the right to call upon military assistance from its ally.<sup>5</sup>

Article 3 of the treaty provides the basis for economic cooperation. Under this provision, Vietnam has engaged in a diversified program of economic assistance to Laos, and has created a variety of interbureaucratic instruments for cooperation between the two governments. Article 4 states that "the Laos-Vietnam borders will be frontiers of lasting brotherly friendship." It alludes to another treaty, signed the same day as the Treaty of Friendship but which remains secret. This treaty presumably established guidelines for rectification and delimitation of the border. A Vietnamese publication noted that a joint border commission from both countries:

... conducted a series of investigations and surveys to delimit the national borders, planted border markers, discussed the setting up of border posts and laid down principles for the operation of border crossing points.<sup>6</sup>

Martin Stuart-Fox writes that the border negotiations between Laos and Vietnam were "hard-fought and at times heated." Lao negotiators resisted Vietnamese demands that the borders be "rectified." He cites reports that the negotiators shouted at each other, and at one point the Lao delegation broke off negotiations. He notes unconfirmed reports that Lao troops fired on a Vietnamese team moving border markers. The two parties signed a border agreement on February 24, 1986, but its contents have not been published. Vietnam is reported to have gained some territory southeast of Sam Neua and sections of the old Ho Chi Minh Trail, while the Lao were compensated with territory in Sekong Province. Until the border can be publicly examined, a suspicion will remain that the Vietnamese emerged from the negotiation in a more favorable position than the Lao.<sup>7</sup>

tionalism.

Article 2 lays the basis for cooperation in defense, calling for

... both sides to assist each other in carrying out close cooperation aimed at reinforcing their defense capacity, preserving their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and in struggling against all schemes and acts of sabotage by imperialism and foreign reactionary forces.

This provision, in the view of the LPDR and the SRV, provided legal legitimation to the presence of Vietnamese troops in Laos. Throughout the revolutionary period in Laos, Hanoi had committed a significant number of troops, both in support of the Pathet Lao as well as in support of their own war objectives in South Vietnam. This troop commitment was, however, not publicly acknowledged. With the signing of the treaty, spokesmen for both countries have referred to their mutual treaty obligations to justify the contemporary assignment of Vietnamese troops to Laos.

A former U.S. Ambassador to Laos, William H. Sullivan, who was a member of the U.S. delegation to the Paris conference, has challenged the legality of the Vietnamese troop commitment to Laos, asserting that it is a violation of the Paris Agreement of January 27, 1973, signed by Vietnam and the United States. Article 20 of the Paris Agreement states:

Foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos, totally withdraw from and refrain from reintroducing into these two countries troops, military advisers and military personnel, armaments, munitions, and war materiel.

Although Ambassador Sullivan, testifying as a private citizen before a congressional committee, charged that Vietnamese troop presence in Laos is just as much a violation of Article 20 of the Paris Agreement as their military presence in Cambodia, this is not an issue which has been pressed by the U.S. government. The SRV and the LPDR reject such charges, asserting

restriction reflects the suspicion that party leaders have about foreigners. The special position reserved for the Vietnamese is justified by the assertion that the Vietnamese best understand conditions in Laos and, most importantly, by the need for genuine solidarity within the Indochina bloc.

In addition to the interaction between LPRP members and official Vietnamese within Laos, there is a frequent pattern of travel which takes LPRP leaders, particularly Kaysone, regularly to Hanoi, and brings Vietnamese personalities on visits to Vientiane. At the 1986 party congresses in both countries, there was an exchange of delegations with important party leaders in attendance.

Still another form of Vietnamese influence on the LPRP is the impact of the VCP's official doctrine. As a result of their long experience with the Vietnamese, their training in Vietnam, and through the intermediary of Vietnamese advisers, the LPRP has embraced the Vietnamese brand of Marxism-Leninism. LPRP doctrine holds, in terms used equally by the VCP, that Laos has completed its national democratic revolution by winning a "people's war" with a worker-peasant alliance under the secret leadership of the LPRP working through a national front. In its march to the next stage, socialism, the LPRP, like the VCP, will implement "three revolutions": a production revolution; a scientific and technical revolution; and an ideological and cultural revolution.

The LPRP has adopted the Vietnamese concept of "people's mastery" which lays out, in vague language, the duties and rights of the people. The party must provide the motive force for change; the government must implement party directives; and the front must mobilize people in organizations of workers, peasants, youth, and women. This LPRP dictum, in the form of a party-state-people trinity, epitomizes the political strategy

Article 5, concerned with foreign policy, provides that the two sides "fully support each other's independent international policies." This provision offers legal support to the political reality that Laos must follow Vietnam's foreign policy.

#### Party-to-Party Interaction

Probably the most important of the numerous channels through which the Vietnamese transmit influence to Laos is the party channel, both formal and informal. The Office of the Secretariat of the LPRP, directed by General Secretary Kaysone, conducts the formal party-to-party relations. On the Vietnamese side there is an organization referred to as CP-38, or the Working Committee of the West, which in 1981 had 140 Vietnamese cadres and reported to Vice-Premier Vo Nguyen Giap, the highest Vietnamese authority responsible for Laos at the time.<sup>8</sup> CP-38 presumably interacts with the LPRP Secretariat. The informal contacts between the top LPRP leaders and Vietnamese party officials may be equally important.

As noted earlier, the eight highest leaders of the LPRP Politburo were ICP members, with a long experience of professional and social contact with the Vietnamese. Many others, including members of the LPRP Central Committee, have served in the nationalist struggle with the Vietnamese, followed political training in Vietnam, and had frequent contact with Vietnamese advisers. This long experience must ease the social interchange with the Vietnamese. LPRP cadres were encouraged to fraternize with the Vietnamese assigned to Laos by Central Committee Resolution #33, promulgated sometime in the mid-1980s and still secret.

This resolution admonished Lao party members to avoid excessive contacts with other foreigners, including members from the socialist bloc countries, except for what is required in pursuit of their duties. This

for constructing socialism: the party must lead, the state must manage, the people are masters.

### Military-to-Military Interaction

A second important channel through which the Vietnamese exercise influence and control is the military. In 1979 and early 1980, Western diplomatic sources estimated Vietnamese troops in Laos to be 40,000, while the LPLA was estimated at 20,000. By the end of 1980, following the Thai closure of the Lao border, a presumed increase of Chinese support to insurgents in Laos, and an augmented Vietnamese road-building program, Vietnamese troop presence was thought to have risen to 50,000 to 60,000. In February 1987, 50,000 was estimated as the probable troop strength.

It is interesting that the Vietnamese troop commitment is so relatively high in Laos, a country of some 3 1/2 million inhabitants with a low level of insurgency, while Cambodia, with more than 7 million people and a much larger insurgent threat, was estimated in February 1987 to have 140,000 Vietnamese troops. The reason for the size of the Vietnamese troop presence in Laos lies in their three-fold function: 1) to provide protection to Vietnam against the threat of Chinese invasion; 2) to engage in engineering and construction tasks; 3) to assist the LPLA in providing security in Laos.

An estimated 15,000 Vietnamese troops, deployed in five regiments, are assigned to the northeast sector of Laos in what is called Front 317. These troops are meant to be a deterrent to the Chinese, who have warned of administering a "second lesson" which might conceivably strike at Vietnam through northeast Laos. Another segment of the Vietnamese troop presence, estimated at 15,000 to 20,000, including at least three divisions, is engaged in building and maintaining roads, bridges, airfields, and performing other engineering tasks. They are deployed particularly in the northern and

eastern regions adjacent to Vietnam, working on improving the road network that ties Laos to Vietnam. There is a substantial contingent stationed in barracks in the region of the Plain of Jars, whose efforts are devoted primarily to construction.

The troops deployed for security purposes are stationed in areas thought to be sensitive. One contingent is located in Luang Prabang Province, the seat of the former royal capital. In early 1977, there was dissident activity in that region and rumors that the dissidents were attempting to involve the deposed King and Crown Prince, who were restricted to their modest palace in Luang Prabang, in a coup d'état. Vietnamese troops helped to deal with the dissidence there, and remain as a deterrent to any hostile political activity, which Vietnam suspects might be incited by Chinese manipulation.

There is another garrison of Vietnamese troops designed to protect the current capital, Vientiane. Vietnamese officials have remarked to visitors that there is still a "nest of reactionaries" in Vientiane. In Vietnam's perspective, their troops serve to deter any notion of uprising in the capital which might attract support from Thailand, just across the Mekong River. There may be one Vietnamese division in Savannakhet Province in the south, helping the LPLA to deal with resistance elements who infiltrate into Laos from sanctuary in Thailand.

In addition to its direct troop commitment, the Vietnamese assign a network of advisers to LPLA units, down to the battalion level and even below in some specialized units. Vietnamese provide communication and logistic support to the LPLA. They give training to high level military officers, in Vietnam, and appoint Vietnamese training staff to help the LPLA with military, and perhaps more importantly, political instruction.

across the Truong Son Range [the Annamite Cordillera].

Vietnam's assistance and cooperation in the domain of culture and education has helped Laos shoot a number of documentary films, provide vocational training for Laos's art troupes and build the first material and technical bases for cultural and artistic work including a film studio and expand information and exhibition work [sic]. Many Lao students have been sent to study in Vietnam. Vietnamese cadres have also helped Laos carry out an educational reform, improve school curricula, compile text books, and open vocational schools and a teacher's college.<sup>9</sup>

Vietnam does not make available to international organizations figures showing the total of its economic assistance to Laos, as other foreign donors do, and those figures seldom appear anywhere in the public domain. However, a Lao official statement, previewing the Tenth Anniversary of the LPDR, issued in October 1985, noted that Vietnamese aid from 1975 to 1985 was \$133.4 million, financing approximately 200 economic projects.<sup>10</sup>

An advisory staff is an important adjunct to the Vietnamese economic assistance program. Vietnam assigns to Laos an estimated 6,000 advisors who offer both political and technical counsel to the Prime Minister's Office and to each of the LPDR ministries. Party and government training schools have a complement of Vietnamese advisors who guide curricula for political instruction, provide documents which are translated from Vietnamese to Lao, and sometimes directly conduct training sessions. Most senior government, as well as party, officials must undergo political training in Vietnam for six months to a year. For example, from April to November 1985, the Minister of Education Bounthiem Phitsamay and Deputy Foreign Minister Souban were assigned to a political instruction course in Hanoi.<sup>11</sup> Without such training, it is widely assumed, careers will suffer.<sup>12</sup>

Most advisors pay regular visits to the ministry they advise while operating from their own headquarters at Kilometer 6 (former residence

Vietnamese cadres influence the appointment and promotion of Lao officers. The Vietnamese appear to operate in all LPLA military units except for the small Lao air force, which benefits from assistance by a Soviet technical and advisory staff. This pervasive Vietnamese military presence provides the visible symbol--if ever one were needed--of where ultimate power lies.

#### Government-to-Government Interaction

Under the rubric of government assistance, there is a sizeable Vietnamese economic assistance program and a large civilian advisory staff in Laos. A Vietnamese publication in 1980 offered a glimpse of the complex of activities undertaken by Vietnam for Laos. It noted that Vietnam has assisted Laos:

... in the fields of agriculture and forestry in particular, focusing on a survey of Laos's agricultural, forestry, and stockbreeding potentials. Vietnam has helped Laos conduct basic surveys, then build a series of production and experimental establishments such as plant and animal nurseries, State farms, afforestation centres and logging camps, roads for the transportation of timber and forestry products, sawmills, turpentine and shellac extraction factories and factories manufacturing such production means as farm implements, fertilizers, insecticides and animal feed. Vietnam also helped in the survey and construction of small- and medium sized-hydraulic, irrigation, and hydro-electric projects. ...

In industry, Vietnam supplies to Laos raw materials, fuel and equipment to expand and build a number of industrial establishments to produce tools, cement and building materials, engineering factories for the postal and communications and transport services, a number of consumer goods factories as well as some mining enterprises, tin and gypsum.

Vietnam is also helping in the repair and upgrading of old roads and in the building of new roads and bridges, in improving the navigability of ... rivers, the building of ferries, and vehicle repair shops. A major joint project is being undertaken by Vietnam and Laos: to build roads from Laos to the Vietnamese ports of Vinh-Ben Thuy and Da Nang



Khamouane Province, and stayed on as an advisor in Vientiane until 1982, noted that Vietnam:

... has helped to build offices and schools, and other public buildings. In some provinces we have helped down to the district level. In industry, we help them to restore and to build new factories. In agriculture, we provide them with technical personnel, advanced varieties of rice, and planning cadres. With this help, in recent years they have been able to provide enough food to feed themselves.

Vietnam's imprint on Laos through the training and education it gives to the Lao is growing in significance. The Lao Minister of Education told me that 11,000 students had been sent abroad to study since 1975, largely to socialist countries which provided financing for them, and more than 5,000 had returned by the end of 1985. The largest number are trained in the Soviet Union, with Vietnam ranking second.

Vietnam has inspired a variety of Indochina-wide institutions designed to reinforce relations among the three countries and provide additional levers for Vietnamese influence and control. For example, every six months the foreign ministers of the three countries meet, rotating their meeting site among the capitals of the member countries.

Another device aimed at promoting goodwill between Vietnam and Laos, in recent years, has been a "people to people" interchange. One mechanism in this campaign has been the creation of "sister province" relationships, providing for mutual assistance and ceremonial exchange between citizens of sister provinces in the two countries. In a talk with officials at Vinh, in Nghe Tinh Province (where Ho Chi Minh was born), I learned that the Lao sister province had sent a delegation expressing sympathy about the typhoon damage suffered by the Vietnamese sister province in 1985, and offering symbolic assistance.

area of the Americans, from the mid-1960s until 1975), where the higher level advisors reside and work, or from other offices in Vientiane. Although some Vietnamese advisors are regarded primarily as giving technical advice, the more important role of the advisory staff is seen as political guidance: they help repare political training for youth, see the LPRP directives are executed, and participate in the formulation of political training of ministry employees. They take part in organizing curricula for the schools, and especially for the social science program at the teacher's college level.

Some Vietnamese advisors speak Lao or French and many need Lao interpreters or have Lao counterparts who speak Vietnamese. No special efforts are made to disguise the presence of the Vietnamese advisers, although they operate in a discreet and unobtrusive manner.

Much of the Vietnamese economic assistance to Laos is negotiated through the Vietnam-Laos Cooperation Commission, which plans the activities of the myriad of delegations that are exchanged to implement the programs. Systemmatic contacts are being developed by cadres throughout the Vietnamese government with their counterparts in Laos. While visiting Laos and Vietnam in December 1985, I encountered my Hanoi host, the Deputy Director of the Institute of International relations, on a regular visit to his counterpart institution lodged in the LPRP headquarters in Vientiane.

The Director of the Committee for Cultural and Economic Relations with Laos and Kampuchea told me, in an interview in Hanoi in 1985, that when an aid agreement has been signed, the relevant ministries of both countries cooperate to carry out the program. For example, if road improvement in Laos is called for, the Ministries of Transport and Communication of Vietnam and Laos will cooperate in the execution of the program. The Lao-speaking Director, who had served with the Lao resistance from 1968 to 1975 in

agenda and move at his own pace. If pressure for conformity to Vietnamese-inspired, Marxist-Leninist standards were to grow too heavy, there would remain the escape hatch across the Mekong to Thailand.

Even though Thailand has adopted policies to deter flight from Laos and the attraction of refugee status has greatly declined since 1980, it seems likely that the refugee flow would increase substantially if large numbers of Lao judged that life in Laos had become intolerable. Thus, the enthusiasm the Lao communist leaders and their Vietnamese mentors have to create a socialist society and a new socialist man in quick-time must be moderated.

A corollary restraint is the natural affinity of the lowland Lao with Thailand rather than Vietnam. The Lao and the Thai speak a language understood by the other, and they share a common religion. Wet rice cultivation in both countries, under similar conditions, means that they follow similar seasonal rhythms and have a common style of life. This cultural orientation of Laos toward Thailand imposes important restraints upon Vietnam's effort to draw her junior partner into the new Indochina orbit.

Laos also has a more natural economic affinity toward its southern neighbor than toward Vietnam. Even after Bangkok officially closed the border a number of times, following a military or political altercation with Vientiane, an irrepressible border commerce has continued. Thailand is the purchaser of Laos's major source of foreign currency--electricity produced by the Nam Ngum Dam. When there is a surplus of rice, fruit, and vegetables in fertile regions of the Mekong River valley on the Lao side, they find their way easily to Thailand, not Vietnam. Thailand has the possibility of increasing the commercial interchange with Laos, even while the LPDR remains under the political hegemony of Vietnam.

Added to these efforts at political integration are Hanoi's efforts to promote Indochina-wide economic integration. For this task, Vietnam can draw upon the French colonial legacy, which linked three disparate countries into the single colonial entity of Indochina. Most important for Laos is the colonial route system which joins it to seaports in Vietnam. The LPDR, with Vietnamese as well as Soviet bloc assistance, has given the highest economic priority to the refurbishing of these roads, which are badly eroded. Vietnam is also assisting in the construction of an oil pipeline which will join the interior of Laos with the Vietnamese seacoast.

Even though Laos is more naturally oriented by geography and culture towards Thailand, the policies of the Thai government have, ironically, given impetus to the Lao process of economic integration with Vietnam. The Thai have intermittently closed their border to Laos, as tensions between the two countries have surfaced, denying Lao access to Thai ports and inhibiting the flow of commerce. The Thai stranglehold has given urgency to the Lao search for a secure access to the sea via Vietnam. In this manner, the political and economic pull exerted by Hanoi to bring Laos closer to Vietnam has been reinforced by the push from Thailand.

### Assessment of the Special Relationship

#### Constraints Upon Vietnamese Influence

The Vietnamese face significant constraints upon their efforts to draw Laos closer into the Vietnamese orbit. It is difficult for Vietnamese Confucians to make good Marxists-Leninists of the more gentle, other-worldly Lao Theravada Buddhists. The Lao seldom express open hostility or even mild objection to the admonitions of zealous Vietnamese cadres. Despite the appearance of assent, the Lao has a tendency to set his own

The Vietnamese leaders appear to accept with equanimity these constraints upon their efforts to bring Laos into closer affinity to Vietnam. The chief Vietnamese concern has been to insure that the LPDR takes no actions that might endanger the interests of Vietnam. Because Laos has not diverged in its foreign or security policies from the Vietnamese line, Vietnam can afford to be indulgent about Lao non-conformity in matters of domestic development. Vietnamese leaders seem confident that history is with them. The refurbished road system, the new flow of commerce in Vietnam's direction, the emerging institutions of Indochina, the technical and political training of young Lao will combine to give Vietnam an increasing role in shaping the destiny of Laos. While the Lao may not be zealous members of the new Indochina bloc, the LPDR is reliable from the Vietnamese point of view.

### Consequences for the LPDR of the Special Relationship

The special relationship between the victorious Vietnamese revolutionaries and their Lao apprentices emerged out of an historical process, and Vietnam's political dominance is likely to endure, at least in the near future, despite the cultural and economic constraints on Hanoi's ability to draw Laos more fully into its orbit. The Vietnamese leaders have reason for satisfaction with the Lao model, as this account has shown, and their Lao counterparts owe gratitude to their sponsors for helping them achieve power. However, for the LPDR regime and the society they are attempting to shape, this relationship has serious consequences.

The LPDR governs with little popular support, although most Lao simply incline to its authority since they have little alternative. The LPDR's dependence upon Vietnam, historically distrusted by the Lao, erodes its legitimacy. Its heavy-handed socialist measures in the early years of its rule, derived from the Vietnamese model, along with its ineptitude in managing the economy, provoked serious distrust, even among those who had been politically neutral.

One measure of popular attitudes toward the government and its relationship with the Vietnamese, might be drawn from the number who have fled. More than 350,000--roughly ten percent of the total population--have crossed the Mekong to refuge in Thailand since 1975. Those who remain passively accept the realities of power. There is historical precedent for such a reaction; the Lao have had powerful outsiders exerting dominant influence in their land for centuries. They are a gentle, compliant people who have learned to adjust to strong patrons when their choice is limited.

Popular reaction ranges on a scale from pervasive passive reaction to some signs of severe displeasure, a subject on which it is difficult to gather

accurate information. The Lao cannot express negative opinions without running a serious risk. Even long-term foreign residents have little access to reliable data on Lao opinion. International agency administrators and voluntary agency personnel who travel in the countryside are invariably accompanied by LPDR authorities. Relationships with these authorities are normally good--the Lao are amiable companions, and they are helpful in facilitating the work of their guests. But the foreigners have little direct, frank interchange with the population. Peasants seldom convey any critical views on politically sensitive issues to foreigners accompanied by government cadres.

Lao refugees within camps in Thailand, not surprisingly, assert that Vietnamese domination is despised, and Vietnamese presence is resented by the people. They often refer to the Lao historic suspicion of the more powerful Vietnamese, and say that the current Vietnamese domination is part of the age-old Vietnamese ambition to "swallow" Laos. Former bureaucrats, even if they acknowledge that Vietnamese advisors may have been discreet in offering counsel, generally express resentment that the Vietnamese have such an influential role in guiding the destiny of Laos.

Organized exile groups are even more vituperative in their denunciations. The United Lao National Liberation Front, for example charges that:

North Vietnam has stationed 60,000 troops in Laos to force the Laotian people into total submission, to push them into exodus from their homeland, and to apportion land for its own needy settlers. <sup>13</sup>

Former General Vang Pao, in a speech to the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, in February 1987, made even more extreme accusations. He charged that Hanoi had:

... separated Laotian men from women, husbands from wives, old

from young and sent them to different reeducation camps. Laotian women were taken away from their loved ones for the purpose of human reproduction with North Vietnamese men so that the new generation in Laos will be purely Vietnamese citizens. . . . The Hanoi regime has also activated a second stage of the Vietnamization program by bringing more than 300,000 Vietnamese citizens to settle in the resource-rich areas of Laos. <sup>14</sup>

Most independent observers, as well as diplomats posted in Laos, have not found credible evidence to support these angry accusations of the colonization of Laos with Vietnamese settlers.

As for the Lao reaction to Vietnamese advisors, the reality may be more complex than the testimony one hears in the refugee camps. An astute foreign social scientist residing in Laos told me that Lao attitudes are highly dependent upon the expertise of the advisor. If he is technically competent, he is appreciated--if he is incompetent, he is resented. Some Vietnamese experts are very good, she noted. Villagers generally appreciate more an effective Vietnamese advisor than an inept Lao government official. Some of the younger Vietnamese, especially those who come under sister province arrangements with few skills, are thought to be arrogant. Nevertheless, she noted some beneficial results from the twin province arrangements. At a small weaving cooperative, she noted that some looms had been sent from similar cooperatives in the Vietnamese sister province, along with some skilled trainers. Other foreign officials confirmed the view that many Vietnamese experts are especially effective, familiar with the Lao socio-political environment--unlike many foreign aid personnel--and many are genuinely dedicated to the development of Laos. And, like other expatriate colleagues, Vietnamese experts are heard to express frustration at the leisurely work pace of the Lao.



For each presumed benefit derived by the LPDR through its special relationship with Vietnam, it is possible to point to a corresponding liability. Hanoi invests sizeable resources aimed at providing security for the LPDR against both internal and external enemies. On the other hand, the LPDR's political alignment with Vietnam helps to create these enemies. Most formidable as an enemy is China, with whom it would be surely in Laos's interest to maintain friendly relations. Little Laos represents no inherent threat to China, and but for its intimate involvement with China's enemy, Vietnam, Lao prospects for amicable relations with its massive northern neighbor would be good. There is a stronger argument that the Vietnamese shield is a deterrent to encroachment on Laos by Thailand who, like Vietnam, has expanded into Lao territory over the centuries. But the Lao intimate involvement with Vietnam provokes the Thais to regard Laos as potentially hostile territory, a possible springboard for their historic Vietnamese rival to threaten Thai interests.

The LPDR's association with Hanoi brings not only substantial economic assistance from Vietnam but also from the larger socialist bloc of which it is a part. Clearly there are substantial resources pouring into the Lao development effort, arguably up to the limit that Laos can absorb them. On the other hand, Laos is deprived by its political orientation of alternative sources of assistance which might be more appropriate to its development needs. Vietnam's own dismal record of economic development does not qualify it well as a mentor for Lao modernization, and Soviet bloc assistance carries other burdens with its contribution.

Vietnam has helped Laos construct a system which aims at developing a coherent national identity based on equality for the diverse peoples within its society. Vietnamese power has helped the LPRP leaders to strengthen

their state and shape their ideology to integrate the heterogeneous members of their country. But, it can be argued, the system imposed with Vietnamese influence is inappropriate to Lao traditions and temperament. Instead of fostering unity, it creates tension and dissension. Many have expressed their disgust with the system by fleeing; most who remain accept it with resignation.

-- The costs and benefits of the special relationship with Vietnam for the LPDR, summarized in the foregoing arguments, might be said to reflect the contradictions between the interests of the current Lao elite and the Lao public. Nevertheless, the forces of history have shaped this special relationship, and it is likely to persist, at least in the near future.

## Notes

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3. See MacAlister Brown article in Martin Stuart-Fox, ed. Contemporary Laos. St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, and New York, St. Martin's Press, 1982.
4. See MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 1986, Appendix E2, for the text of the treaty.
5. U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Policy Toward Indochina Since Vietnam's Occupation of Kampuchea: Hearings Before the Subcommittee On Asian and Pacific Affairs, 97th Congress, 1st session, Oct. 15, 21, 22, 1981, pp. 83-89.

6. Ky Son, 1980b, p. 26, as quoted by Martin Stuart-Fox, Laos: Politics, Economics and Society, Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc., Boulder, CO, 1986, p. 176.

7. Ibid., pp. 176-177.

8. This Vietnamese structure in Laos was revealed by Khamsengkeo Sengsethith, former bureau director of the LPDR Ministry of Health and former Secretary-General of the Lao committee of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, who defected to China in November 1981. See Nayan Chanda, "A Defector's Designs," Far Eastern Economic Review 115, No. 13, March 26, 1982, p. 44.

9. Ky Son, 1980, pp. 26,30, as cited by Martin Stuart-Fox, Laos: Politics, Economics and Society, 1986, pp. 175-176.

10. "Memoir on LPDR Ties to Socialist Countries," Part I, Vientiane Domestic Service in Lao, October 23, 1985, in FBIS, November 8, 1985.

11. John McBeth, "Borderline Friends," FEER, 16 January 1986, pp. 27-28.

12. See Martin Stuart-Fox, Asian Pacific Community, p. 79.

13. Letter from Outhong Souvannavong, President, United Lao National Liberation Front, in letter dated July 11, 1986, to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

14. Speech to Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., February 5, 1987,  
mimeo.

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